

Dr. Tait Butler on Farmers' Institute.

II.

Editors Progressive Farmer:

Another idea which is common, and at the same time far from the truth, but which has stood much in the way of successful institute work is that the purpose of the farmers institute is to give advice to farmers regarding the details of management of their respective farms.

"ADVICE" TO FARMERS.

Until recent years there was no agricultural science. Agricultural education is a development of the last quarter century, and it is, therefore, not strange that those engaged in a business, all knowledge of which was until recently based on individual experience, should resent the impertinence of those whom they fancy inexperienced attempting to give them advice. In short, while it seems to be a fixed trait of human character to enjoy the giving of advice few of us are able to accept it graciously or profitably. But, as stated, the idea is entirely erroneous, for the farmers institute worker of to-day knows only too well that when dealing with those complex problems of nature, with which the farmer is confronted, there are too many unknown and unknowable factors for any human wisdom to be able to lay down set rules for their solution. However, this is not sufficient reason why any farmer should refuse to equip himself with all known agricultural facts for the solution of those problems which arise on every farm; for, other things being equal, the man who is best able to successfully meet the varying exigencies of farming is he who is in possession of the largest number of correct principles and facts relating to farming. For example, every thoughtful man, and certainly every medical student not long after entering college, realizes fully that no professor, however learned or successful himself, can tell his students how every case met with in practice is to be treated, simply because no two cases, even of the same disease, are ever just alike. In medicine, as in farming, that unknown quantity, "life," enters into and makes uncertain nearly all problems, but this does not deter those who would make the greatest success in the practice of medicine from striving to acquire all possible information concerning medical facts and principles as taught in medical colleges. Why then will those who would make the greatest success of farming refuse to learn, through the farmers institute, facts and principles regarding the science and practice of farming, because forsooth, the institute lecturer is unable, or unwilling to attempt to instruct them in the practical details of management of their respective farms? No! most emphatically, the farmers institute is not a medium for giving advice to farmers, but has for one of its objects the carrying to them, a better knowledge of the underlying principles of the best modern agricultural practice. The application of this knowledge must of necessity

always be left to the individual farmer.

INSTITUTE LECTURERS AND "PRACTICAL FARMERS."

A third obstacle to the development of farmers institutes is a well set opinion, amounting almost to prejudice, that the institute lecturer is not a practical farmer, hence, can impart no information of practical value to farmers. It seems to me this is a misconception based either on a false idea of what constitutes practical teaching, or a lack of familiarity with the institute workers of to-day.

Let us, in order to clear up this point, if that be possible, discuss briefly what is necessary to fit a man for giving practical information at a farmers institute. In crop production there are, among others, five important factors influencing the result: seed, season, soil, cultivation and fertilization. Granting that this is correct, then, who is better fitted to give practical advice concerning the use of fertilizers, the man who has no regard for accurate seed selection, draws his conclusions from so-called tests made in different seasons, uses different types of land and does not measure it, cultivates differently, guesses at the amount of fertilizer used and then "estimates" the crop (as is usual with the so-called practical farmer) or the man who selects his seed intelligently and carefully, plants on similar types of soil, measures his land, cultivates alike on the same day and weighs the fertilizer and the crops, instead of guessing at them? What matters it if, because of the increased labor, the latter's crops are not made at a profit, are his results not valuable to others? Is he not because of this greater care and accuracy a better and more practical teacher of the proper use of fertilizers?

Let us take one more illustration of this question. Who is the practical feeder, the man who throws an unknown quantity of food to a steer and guesses at his weight at the end of a month's feeding to determine the gain made from the unknown quantity of food consumed, or the man who weighs the feed and then the steer and is able to state exactly how many pounds of food were required to make a pound of gain? To my mind the practical feeder is he who, knowing something of the composition of foodstuffs, compounds a ration to meet the requirements of the animal to do the work expected of it, weighs the food given, and then weighs the animal. On the other hand, is not the theoretical feeder one who, on the theory that it must be right because it is customary, places food of unknown quantity and quality before an animal and guesses at the result?

The experience of this sort of a feeder may tell him all sorts of lies and yet because this worthless experience does not agree with the results of the "scientific" feeder, the latter is condemned as impractical. In short, the man who makes numerous accurate tests, where all known factors likely to disturb the results are considered and equalized, and where the scales and the tare line take the place of "guessing" and "estimating," is the most accurate and practical teacher.

In my next letter I shall discuss the relation of the Farmers' Institute to the Agricultural College, and the Experiment Station or Test Farm.

TAIT BUTLER.

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January 11, 1904.

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